

Talking to Strangers



Tucked away in a corner of Angus in the small village of Newtyle is the business of James Pirie and Son. Jim Pirie started the business in 1960 with his son Alan joining him five years later. Still working 8 till 7 and sometimes even later Jim serves and chats to all his customers and has surely got to be Scotland's , if not the UK's, oldest working butcher.

It was 1933 when the 14 year old Jim Pirie left school to be an apprentice butcher at JH Paterson in Stanley, Perthshire. He was a conscript to the Royal Air Force being called up at the age of 21. After the war Jim was asked to help out at the Perth slaughterhouse he regularly cycled passed but the job he was requested to fill for 2 or 3 weeks ended up lasting ten years.

After briefly returning to Stanley for a few years Jim started out on his own from North Street in Newtyle moving to his current premises in 1964. The rest is a considerable piece of history too long for this chronicle!

Today the shop is successfully run by Jim's son Alan but father is always nearby to chat up the customers. Jim who celebrated his 85th birthday on 2nd June has no thoughts of retiring just yet saying: "I would never dream of slowing down, dry rot and woodworm would set in. I like to keep going and I enjoy continuing to have a hands on role in the shop."

The chat is one of the things that strikes you most about the shop. Being a small village of only 1000 inhabitants the Pories do know and call every local by name but the envious event of just about every ten minutes is the steady flow of folk through the door that they do not know.

Nestling at the end of Church Street Piries is signposted by an A board on the main through road.

Below the shop premises with the family owned licensed grocers next door.



Below: Jim Pirie at work. His enthusiasm for the trade is an example to all.

His cheerful disposition is refreshing and fun - the customers obviously enjoy it.





Jim, Alan and their two staff members are experts in making customers welcome. Jim just loves to tell his paying guests about his meat products and the walls of the shop display Gold, Silver and even Diamond awards in a way that some has likened to a recording studio. You get a cookery lesson too while Jim prepares your order.

Jim Pirie: "You have to be able to talk to the customers, it is a very important thing to talk to the customers even if you don't know them. Speak about the weather and if you don't agree then you just say it's not very good. You have got to thank them very much and tell them what you are selling. That's what brings them back."

At Piries they have always maintained their reputation for handling quality produce and customers come from far and wide to purchase from a wonderful array of meat products enhanced by a hand-picked delicatessen range and a selection of fresh fruit and vegetables. The Cartmel Village Shop Sticky Toffee Pudding and the freshly picked shining strawberries looked irresistible. The beef, lamb and pork come from Scotch Premier and St Andrews Wholesale Co. and the leaflet on the counter top tells you that the business makes no fewer than 35 different varieties of sausages and burgers.

The octogenarian described what drives the business forward with the ideals of a young buck: "We had to move and go for people's tastes. These are always changing and we moved to being innovative. That is what has kept going."

Is that what brings the customers in? "Well besides me, I cannot handle them all" joked Jim, "you have to work at it and you can't stand still. You can't sit back and leave it to the supermarkets. You must keep promoting the goods that you have. If you just have stewing steak and that, that's not people's habits now. When a man and woman are both working they need something quick and you have to cater for them."



"People say you'll not be busy in a country shop but they haven't a clue. We have no complaints, we are really terribly busy" added Jim.

Alan admits that the business is pushed to the limit given the small space they have. Lifting the top two meat awards in the Drambuie Scottish Food Awards in 1996 was the start on the road to 84 awards that the business now holds. Jim's goal is two awards from the forthcoming Make it with Meat Awards so that they can overtake his number of years.

"We have got one or two ideas up our sleeves" chipped in Alan.

For a Monday afternoon in July the counter was well stocked and the business had a constant flow of customers who were spending good money. Cars kept pulling up at the door and happy smiling faces left clutching Federation carriers full of Piries' wares.

And what of the future? Jim added: "I honestly feel that the trend is there. Customers are finding out it is far better coming to a traditional butcher. They tell us that what they buy from us tastes a lot better than what they buy from the supermarket."

The question was really what about the life of Jim Pirie, but for this gentleman, work is life.

